

# What's Left to Teach?

Martha Mahtani

As a prospective teacher, my thoughts extend far beyond things like how I might arrange my classroom or how I might balance friendship and authority in the classroom. While these are some factors that are crucial to bring into consideration, an even greater concern of mine is the possibility of my own students becoming prey to the all-too-real threat of dead orthodoxy. I firmly believe that it is every regenerated believer's desire to know about God in their minds and also to know God personally in their hearts; yet the question remains how to encourage the people truly to show this in their lives. It is incredibly necessary to understand and teach about God, but the issue lies in the lack of experiential application, which often does not follow. After doctrine is presented and explained, cemented and maintained, even understood and believed, what's left to teach? In efforts to combat dead orthodoxy, our schools must be supported by teachers who impress the need for the truths of God to be manifested in the very hearts of our young people through six different ways: consistent discipline, redirection of praise, excitement in knowledge, showing by example, leading in prayer, and providing a biblical basis.

In order for teachers to recognize the danger that exists in solely having proper head knowledge without heart knowledge, they must be diligent in the discipline of their students. Although there is a difference in how teachers and parents ought to discipline, it is nonetheless understood that teachers are entrusted with the raising and educating of the children while in school. The first two questions and answers of the Heidelberg Catechism state it clearly and beautifully—three things are necessary for us to know as children of God that we might enjoy our only comfort, the first being how great our sins and miseries are (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 1). Teachers within God's kingdom hold a delightful status and blessed calling—to

walk alongside a child and to help him or her see and acknowledge hersin. As friend-servants of God, teachers must be the same for their students, making it such that “iron sharpeneth iron” as they grow together in the way of discipline (John 15:15; Prov. 27:17). Ephesians 6 speaks to fathers about rearing their children, but it can also be a command for teachers in relation to their students to “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” while filling the role of parents (Eph. 6:4). When students are properly admonished and instructed in reasons as to why their obedience matters and how God blesses them in it, their hearts will be more inclined to know that God.

A different approach in fighting against dead orthodoxy is regularly to redirect students to praise God alone, specifically with regard to their abilities. Often, Philippians 4:13 comes to our lips flippantly and mindlessly. “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” If God’s people truly took to heart the fact that the ability to perform any good work would be impossible if not for God’s perfect work, what a blessed life that would be! So must teachers ensure that this is what their students really believe. The opportunities are endless—a good grade earned on an assignment, an outpouring of praise received for a well-written paper, a skilled performance glorified in a presentation. Teachers must be ready and willing to remind the students that these abilities are a result of the Spirit working in and through them so that they might proclaim with Paul, “But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15:10). Students should be encouraged that as people placed here by God on this earthly pilgrimage, “if God is truly our God, we must also serve Him” (denHartog). It is neither morally proper nor even logical that the one who gave us life is not the one to whom we seek to reflect all the glory! Proper redirection of glory and acknowledgment will go a long way in encouraging students to seek the Lord first with their hearts through all of their actions.

The practice of spurring on excitement about God and his work in their lives is yet another opportunity to acknowledge and warn against dead orthodoxy. While the content is important, the manner in which teachers present it must be one of awe and wonder. We need to get students excited about the doctrine of forgiveness—that God sent a righteous savior to die for ungodly sinners like us (Rom. 5:6–8)! How many times do we sing “Amazing Grace,” in awe of the work of Christ saving wretches like us, and then the next moment gossip about the sin or wrongdoing of our neighbor? Praise the Lord that they are forgiven in Christ! We need to get students excited about the doctrine of providence —that God directs each and every moment for our good so that nothing befalls us by chance (Rom. 8:28, Belgic Confession, Article 13)! How often do we thank God for his sovereignty over all things, and then later worry about and sorrow over the hardships that we face? Praise the Lord that we are upheld by his hand! It must not be true of anyone that “you’ve loved what you’ve learned about God more than God Himself” (Segal). Even with regard to those doctrines which we simply cannot fathom as mere creatures, teachers must encourage a “holy adoration of these mysteries” so that they then, together with their students, exclaim with passion and joy, “O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Canons of Dort, Head I, Article 18; Rom. 11:33). Then and only then will students yearn to know God in their hearts and live in the world as true children of the God in whom they believe.

In keeping away from the danger of dead orthodoxy, teachers must also be constantly showing examples of the attributes of God seen in the classroom. The simplest way for any teacher to do this is to live out her own convictions, revealing the righteousness of God “from faith to faith” and showing herself as putting on the new man, “which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Rom. 1:17, Eph. 4:24). Being unashamed to speak of their

God, confident about their faith in God, and ecstatic to share what God has done in their lives are some aspects of how the God of scripture can be shown experientially by teachers. As a result, students will see in their teachers a strong passion for the truth of God's word—"a pattern of good works" to follow and imitate in their own lives (Titus 2:7-8). Another way could be as simple as engaging the class in a field trip, musical piece, or text that sheds light on who God is. If a certain facet of nature in creation must be understood, there is no better way truly to ignite a love for God on account of that knowledge than by bringing the students to be in the creation, which declares the glory of God in itself (Ps. 19:1). In doing these things, teachers show to the students that they serve a God who commands godliness in every area and who wants his people truly to know him in their hearts as their creator.

Since drawing near to God with the heart is not something that happens automatically, but only by the Spirit's work, another good and proper practice of combatting dead orthodoxy is the teaching of and leading in prayer. Students need to be taught to pray—how to pray, when to pray, why to pray—so that they are ready and able to do so. Teachers must also pray with and for their students, and once again they have a wonderful opportunity to do so! Scripture exhorts the believer in the book of James, "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you" (James 4:8). When teachers come to God in prayer, they lay before him their praises, their sorrows, their thanks, their requests—but they also lay before him their students. The calling of a teacher is to bring to God the needs and cares of the students, repeating along with the words of scripture, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16; Belgic Confession, Article 26). While it may be uncomfortable or difficult at times, the prayers of teachers over and with students are immensely impactful. "The reverence we show for God, the sincerity and earnestness of our prayers, the

interest in the regular study of God's word in the daily life of our covenant families, understanding the application of the word of God...all these things teach our children the meaning of true godliness" (denHartog). Although this speaks to parents specifically, it most assuredly can be a calling to teachers as substitutes in the classroom. Students will then see in their teachers a respect for God and a desire for their own hearts to be near to him as well.

A final and yet most important course of action in warning against this serious threat is to provide a clear and biblical basis for why believers ought to heed this command of God to draw near to him. Jehovah tells us in his word, "I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me" (Prov. 8:17). What more could a child of God need than to hear this comforting promise! The influence that teachers have on students can and in fact should be grounded in how scripture speaks to those in the covenant. The Heidelberg Catechism reiterates this thought, supplying the answers "patient in adversity" and "thankful in prosperity" to the question of what advantage the Christian has in knowing the providence of God (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10). The joy of a student would be indescribable if a teacher impressed upon his or her mind that these benefits are enjoyed when one not only knows about God but truly knows him as her Lord and Savior. Especially in the midst of trials and troubles, teachers must remind their students that our savior "appear[s] in the presence of God for us" and that, in the words of a current teacher, "We have CHRIST pleading our cause! What greater balm for discouragement is there than that?!" (Heb. 9:24; Mingerink). Taking scripture and unfolding it for covenant children in the schools can have a lasting effect on how they serve God with their minds and also come to know him fully in their hearts.

So that dead orthodoxy does not run rampant in our denomination, teachers must be persistent in encouraging students to beware of this evil by not only teaching them the truths of

scripture but by entreating them to a heartfelt walk with Christ, to which they are called. Their fight in this battle and their deeper understanding of how to know God more fully through their knowledge of him will surely draw them closer to their Lord and Savior. Let it never be said of us—neither teachers nor students—that “they knew so much about God, and yet they knew him so little” (Segal). As God continues to gather and preserve his church, we must altogether strive to keep our focus proper and balanced—having both a knowledge of God on our lips and an obvious application in our hearts. Then will God’s people with joy take comfort in the covenant he has made with us—“I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer. 31:33).

Originally published in Vol. 78 No. 12

#### Works Cited

denHartog, Arie. "Teaching Piety and Practical Godliness in the Covenant Home." *The Standard Bearer*, 15 September 2009. Web.

Mingerink, Ethan. *A Heart to Teach — Hoping to Avoid Mutiny*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, 21 March 2019.

Segal, Marshall. "You Cannot Serve Both God and Theology." *Desiring God*, 6 February 2015. Web.

*The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*. Grandville: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005. Print.